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AUTHOR Greenlaw, M. Jean
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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the impact of books on young readers, and briefly examines several titles that can help children and adolescents understand the world around them. Following a brief review of research studies that have shown that reading literature affects the values that children hold, the paper discusses titles dealing with death, personal fears, disabilities, differences, and identity. A final section cautions against using the titles in any intentional bibliotherapy effort. A list of 49 books for children and young people concludes the paper. (HTH)

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Books as They Reflect the Reader: An Exploration

M. Jean Greenlaw
North Texas State University

When one explores the idea of "using" books with children and youth, one must attempt to determine whether this use is worth the time and effort it requires. Do books have an impact on the reader? Do they affect the reader in a measureable way over a period of time? Can books provide a vicarious medium for expressing one's own emotions? These questions can be answered, in part, through research and through personal experience.

Several studies have been conducted concerning the reading of literature and its effect on the values children and youth hold. Lewis (1968) produced research which tended to support the assumption that reading of literature effects values which children hold. In a study of sixth grade pupils, she measured the impact of selected literature upon values of aggressiveness, selfishness and nurturance and discovered that these values were influenced by reading. Shirley (1968) reported that in a study to determine whether books do influence personal development, most students were influenced in a positive way in areas of self-image, philosophy of life, social problems and sensitivity to people. Both Broderick (1966) and Emery (1958) advance the idea that values play an important role in literature for children and youth and that these values have a decided potential to act as a change agent within students.

The impact of books over time can best be revealed by an anecdote concerning Milton Meltzer, well-known author of informational books. In a speech given

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in 1979 to a group of teachers and librarians, he stunned his audience by making an impassioned plea for care in the selection of books they used as instructional tools. He declared that he had only recently come to terms with his own being. He had denied his Jewishness for over sixty years because, coming from a well read family, every "important" book he read condemned or denigrated Jews. Books had a devastating and long term impact on Meltzer's life.

Additionally, personal experience will help highlight books as a medium for vicarious expression of emotion. I have often laughed or cried over good books, but the most powerful response I can remember came recently in the early hours of the morning when I was finishing Jacob Have I Loved, by Katherine Paterson. I found myself sobbing deeply for an extended period of time, and when I calmed down I realized I was crying not over Louise's resentment of her sister Caroline, but over my resentment of my younger brother. Paterson reached into me and drew out this still sensitive emotion.

Obviously, I believe books have an effect on the reader and are worth the time and effort to locate those that will be helpful. I have chosen five areas for discussion and include books appropriate for children and youth from ages six through sixteen.

Death

Coping with death, particularly the death of a parent, is one of the most difficult and painful experiences we face. Few people seem comfortable with death and most avoid talking about it. Jill Krementz has produced a book that should be shared with all ages. How It Feels when a Parent Dies is a book of essays written or dictated by children from ages seven to sixteen. Each child has had a parent die, and each expresses the pain, anger, fear, unease with friends,

etc. that we all face. The essays are painfully honest and there are many phrases or descriptions where one says, "Yes, that's how I feel." The book never sinks to the maudlin and can be used in numerous situations.

Two picture books for younger children are The Accident and The Tenth Good Thing about Barney. Each book is about the loss of a pet and each explores the strong emotions felt by the owner of the pet. The situations seem real and the conclusions are satisfying.

Six year old Lewis wakes up in the middle of the night and calls out. When his mother comes, he says he's been waiting for his Grandpa and he misses him. Surprised, his mother explains that Grandpa died when Lewis was two and she didn't think Lewis remembered him. The two share their memories and each is comforted. My Grandson Lew is one of many sensitive books by Charlotte Zolotow that evoke a childlike response to life.

The death of a friend is a startling and frightening experience as well as one filled with sorrow. Several excellent books probe this topic and are intended for children from nine through sixteen. A Taste of Blackberries can be read to children as young as eight or nine and read and enjoyed by children through the age of twelve. Jamie was special, though a show-off, and when he dies from a bee sting, his best friend recalls their many pleasures together and suffers from the guilty feeling that maybe he could have saved Jamie. Realistic responses, such as admiring the "neat" squared-off hole in which Jamie will be buried, have made this a particularly apt book for use in school. Bridge to Terabithia also examines a child's response to the death of a friend. Tunnel Vision is slightly different in that fifteen-year-old Anthony has committed suicide and his parents and friends each feel guilty, though none was to blame. The book is concerned with those left behind and their ways of coping with Anthony's death.

Two books for older readers regard the adjustment to the idea and reality of death over a period of time. Friends Til the End tells of a developing friendship of two teenage boys and their responses to the impending death of one of them through leukemia. The book pulls no punches and presents powerful descriptions of suffering. May I Cross Your Golden River is told from the perspective of Jordan, an 18-year-old who is slowly dying of Lou Gehrig's disease. Jordan is shown within his family, and the responses of each of them are well delineated.

Each of the books discussed has been chosen because of its honest and powerful portrayal of a painful subject. Each can be valuable if used in the proper context.

Fears

Our fears are numerous and changeable and often without grounding in reality. They are real, nevertheless, and must be faced in a manner that will help us grow. A variety of fears are examined in the books mentioned here.

Sibling rivalry and concern for the future are the focus of two picture books, Everett Anderson's Nine Month Long and Peter's Chair. A book for older readers was mentioned earlier, Jacob Have I Loved.

What happens when one faces a new situation, such as a new school or the first days at school? Timothy Goes to School is a delightful picture book that will elicit satisfied responses from young children. A second appropriate book is The New Girl at School.

Bedtime for Frances shows Frances using all the known ploys to keep from going to sleep, and the things (tigers, spiders, something at the window) she dreams up that end up scaring her. The combination of parental indulgence and sternness is realistic and the book has been a favorite for years.

Paul Zindel is a noted author of young adult novels, but his picture book I Love My Mother is a perceptive revelation of a young boy's feelings about his mother. The text and pictures evoke love, though never mawkish, and the final page has a powerful impact; his mother understands why he misses his father. We don't know where the father is, but it is unimportant. It is the understanding that counts.

The fear of being laughed at or appearing foolish is well-handled in Ira Sleeps Over. On his first night spent at a friend's house, Ira must face the dilemma of whether or not to take his teddy bear. The problem is compounded by his nagging sister, but resolved in a satisfying and realistic manner.

Older readers also have fears. Gilly fights the world because her mother deserted her and she is placed in a series of foster homes. Gilly comes to understand what love and affection mean in The Great Gilly Hopkins. P.S. is afraid her father is going to remarry. In The Saving of P.S. she does all she can to thwart this relationship and slowly comes to an acceptance of its reality.

Lena is a member of the only black family in a small Texas town early in this century. Her fears are real and generated by the hate felt by some members of the town. Lena learns her Words by Heart and wins a school contest she is not supposed to win. The aftermath is tragic, but hope for the future is rooted in the reality of the book.

What is a coward? Does fear make one a coward? Hans Scholl knows he is afraid for his life, but despite this fear he continues to defy the Nazis and to produce the White Rose newspaper that denounces them. This book explores fear and one's response to fear as much as it tells the true tale of a brother and sister who defied the Nazis and forfeited their lives to their cause. It is a powerful and introspective book.

Disability

Public Law 94-142 mandated mainstreaming in the public schools and generated a plethora of maudlin and sappy books about kids with disabilities. Fortunately among the dross are some real gems. Following is a potpourri of some of the better books.

Young children will understand the special satisfaction Nelly feels in her new relationship with Bartholomew. When she was young, Bartholomew took her for walks and shared life with her. Now she is a bit older, Bartholomew has injured himself and she takes him for walks in his wheelchair and restores the joy to his life. Low key, pleasant and satisfying in all respects.

Jacob is mentally retarded, but that doesn't hinder his friendship with Sam. Each has something to contribute to the friendship and each grows because of it. My Friend Jacob is one of the best and most realistic depictions of mental retardation I have seen in a picture book. On a slightly older level, Kelly is a nine-year-old with a learning disability. His real joy is his time at Kelly's Creek and it becomes the focal point of a conflict with his parents who don't believe he is trying hard enough to learn. The resolution is credible. Adolescent readers will respond to Casey Flannagan and her befriending of a thirty-three year old man with the mind of a twelve year old. Their friendship is believable and the impact it has on the town is well delineated. All Together Now is the story of one summer in the lives of these two people and its probable influence on their futures.

Two realistic and straight-forward books about children who are deaf are Anna's Silent World and I Have a Sister--My Sister Is Deaf. Anna's Silent World is particularly good because it depicts six-year-old Anna as joyously part of the normal world of school, dancing class, etc. Photographs show Anna throughout

all facets of her daily life, including visits to the New York League for the Hard of Hearing. In the same vein, Don't Feel Sorry for Paul is a non-fiction book illustrated with excellent photographs that shows how a boy born with stumps for hands and one foot leads a relatively normal life. By discussing their disabilities in a straight-forward manner, some of the fear of the unknown is dispelled.

Adolescents can empathize with the trauma of two seventeen-year-old identical twins when one is paralyzed in a car wreck and the other escapes with minor injuries. Each has to come to terms with the future, and it is hard for both. The effects of an accident on an entire family is honestly portrayed, revealing the fear, anger, despair and adjustment. Head Over Wheels is particularly good at exploring this sensitive subject without making heroes or villains of the characters.

19 Steps Up the Mountain could never be believed if it were not a documentary. The De Bolts have six children of their own and thirteen "unadoptable" children of mixed parentage and extreme disability. How this family instills endurance and the will to overcome disability is truly an inspiration. The book is not all sweetness and light as it reveals the failures as well as the considerable triumphs.

Differentness

How does one define differentness? I am sure we each see ourselves as different and must learn to cope with our own perception. The following are some types of differentness as seen by authors of books for children and youth.

A different family is depicted by Arnold Adoff in Black is brown is tan. Describing his own family in free verse form, Adoff who is white and married to a black woman, characterizes all the shades of color and loving in their family. It is a pleasant book and shares rather than preaches.

Two picture books about boys in untraditional roles are William's Doll and Oliver Button Is a Sissy. William wants a doll to love and care for and his grandmother sees to it that he finally gets one. The idea of nurturance is beautifully depicted by Zolotow. Oliver Button is a reincarnation of the author of the book and the trauma and triumph of being different is explored.

An adopted child is disappointed when his bus driver friend comments that he wouldn't want Somebody Else's Child. How they resolve their misunderstanding is nicely portrayed.

You would think that being ordinary would be no problem, but not when you are the only ordinary member of a very unordinary family. Ordinary Jack finds that he, too, has several "strings to his bow" in this hilarious British novel. Ida Early also doesn't "fit in." In Ida Early Comes Over the Mountain, she takes over the care of two children who learn the subtle values of loyalty and love.

Irene Hunt depicts a feminist at the turn of the century in her book Claws of a Young Century. Those who enjoy the freedoms women have today will be aghast at the price that was paid for what we take so casually. Being different in that era truly cost.

A final differentness is explored in Happy Endings Are All Alike. A lesbian relationship unfolding between teen-age girls is sensitively shown in this book. The impact on friends and family as well as on the women themselves is part of the story. The author is a lesbian and is writing in an attempt to present a viewpoint often overlooked.

Who Am I?

This aspect is of concern predominantly to emerging adolescents and young adults. The search for self takes many paths and is probably never completed, but there are numerous books that pursue the topic.

The only book I would recommend for younger readers is a picture book by Charlotte Zolotow entitled Someone New. It is intended for the ten to twelve-year-old and shows a boy "putting away childish things" and becoming comfortable with his new desires. It is a special book because of its depth of concept and yet ease of reading.

The remainder of these books are similar in concept yet diverse in approach. Each is aimed at the adolescent reader and is about adolescents. Each is valuable for the bit of insight it provides the reader.

Two rather light-hearted books that deal with family situations and the day-to-day problems of growing up are The Cat Ate My Gymsuit and It All Began with Jane Eyre. It is helpful to be able to look at serious problems with a sense of humor. It is all that saves us sometimes. The Changling also manages to blend humor with seriousness in a beautifully written story of a young girl struggling to find her place in her family.

Incorporating more serious aspects of plot, there are six books I would like to briefly mention. Ordinary People hit the best seller lists and I hope was read by all who bought it. It is a powerful evocation of a young man's struggle for self. The Outsiders has been a favorite of adolescents since 1967. It is a story of gang warfare, but more importantly of a young man who decides to become himself rather than a member of a gang. A Shadow Like a Leopard is similar in that 14-year-old Ramon Santiago must decide whether he is going to be a street punk or a poet. He is torn in several directions and the ending is hopeful, not pat. The 79 Squares is a more meditative, slowly paced story of a relationship between an adolescent boy and a man in his eighties.

Two stories with female protagonists are Mollie Hunter's autobiographical A Sound of Chariots and The Lost Star, a science fiction novel. Hunter was a writer from an early age, growing up in a community that didn't understand her and writing for teachers who condemned her differentness. The pain is there, but the eventual triumph is wonderful. The Lost Star presents a young woman who must choose between family and personal needs and who helps others to see with more insight.

A book I am leary of, but which is certainly beautifully and powerfully written, is The Chocolate War. The ending is one of despair, but careful discussion could probe the possible ramifications of the book and yield meaningful avenues of thought.

Conclusions

At the beginning of this article I mentioned the idea of using books with children and youth. I do not mean to imply that the books discussed in this article should be employed in any manner of bibliotherapy. Teachers are not therapists and are not trained to deal with the possible aftermath of an application of bibliotherapy. Handing a child How It Feels When a Parent Dies shortly after the death of a parent is likely to cause a traumatic response. A book such as this should be used in a class before such an occurrence, or recommended generally to a class. Each of the books recommended in this article is appropriate for use with groups or individuals, but each is meant to be shared in a way that is non-threatening to the individual. The well-meaning, but often heavy-handed application of bibliotherapy is to be avoided.

Each of the five areas chosen for discussion is a common one that touches all our lives at some point. Teachers should be aware of opportunities to incorporate such themes in their teaching. It is possible that some of these

could be used in conjunction with selections from textbooks; that a book could be selected for reading aloud to the whole class; or, that these books could be placed on a list of titles recommended for independent reading.

Books do have an effect on the reader and can be part of the life experience that shapes the reader. It behooves those who work with children and youth in any capacity to become familiar with books that can be read and discussed and that one feels can have a positive influence.

Readers are created, in part, by the model of reading they see. A teacher who is a reader; one who knows books and shares them with a class or individuals; one who takes the time to read aloud to a class; this teacher is the person who has the possibility of having an impact on a student's life. The books recommended in this article, in the opinion of this writer, are books that are worthy of being shared with children and youth.

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